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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The status of the Russian language in linguistically divided Ukraine has thus far featured less in the current Presidential election campaign than it did in ¶2004. The Regions party (PoR), which calls for Russian to become a second state language, has chosen instead to concentrate more on economic themes that resonate with the broader range of voters at a time of economic crisis. Nonetheless, the status of the Russian language remains a hot-button issue in the Russophone East and South. While Regions leader Yanukovych, if elected, would likely be unable to change the Constitution to make Russian a second state language, he would be able to roll back various decrees by the current government to encourage greater use of Ukrainian.
End Summary.

Russian Language as a Campaign Issue

¶2. (U) The 18 registered presidential candidates present a broad spectrum of views on the status of the Russian language in Ukraine. Only three candidates, Viktor Yanukovych (PoR), Petro Symonenko (Communist Party of Ukraine), and Inna Bogoslovska, advocate in their campaign platforms for making Russian the second state language. Among the other candidates, Rada Speaker Lytvyn defends Russian as a language for interethnic communication, Prime Minister Tymoshenko supports Ukrainian as the sole state language, and President Yushchenko makes no mention of language in his platform, despite his government's strong encouragement of the use of Ukrainian.

¶3. (SBU) In a recent conversation with us, PoR MP Miroshnychenko discussed his party's current approach to the language issue, explaining that the PoR sees the issue narrowly as one of a citizen's right to communicate with the government. He noted that outside of official written communication, Russian-speaking Ukrainians experience little difficulty or discrimination. While reiterating his party's position that Russian should be the second state language, Miroshnychenko said that the PoR would not emphasize the divisive language issue in the current presidential campaign in order to avoid alienating potential voters, especially in Western Ukraine.

¶4. (SBU) Nevertheless, Miroshnychenko made a point to confirm that the PoR has already gotten enough signatures to put the official-status issue to a referendum. Moreover, Leonid Klimov, an Odesa oligarch and chief of the Odesa Oblast PoR branch, told us that language is the central issue of the presidential campaign in his region. He alleged that having to deal with Ukrainian-only documents is a hardship for Russian-speakers, and said that the government discriminates in its hiring practices against applicants who do not speak Ukrainian well. Klimov especially criticized recent regulations to strengthen the position of the Ukrainian language in education, claiming that teachers would face disciplinary measures for speaking Russian at any time within the confines of a school building, even during off-hours.

15. (SBU) Yanukovych himself alluded to the possible approach of a PoR government during a campaign stop in Donetsk on November 18, explaining that it would be "simple" to solve the Russian language problem: all that is needed is the President and 226 votes in the Rada. Changing the constitution to make Russian a second state language would, however, require 300 votes in the Rada, which none of our contacts believe the PoR would be able to muster. Rather, they suggest a PoR government could probably satisfy its core constituency by rolling back some of the Yushchenko-era decrees and regulations to promote Ukrainian, and could tweak existing legislation to enhance use of Russian.

Public Opinion

16. (SBU) The status of the Russian language remains a resonant issue for many Ukrainians in the East and South. One is Kostyantyn Shurov, head of the "Russian Community in Ukraine," the largest organization supporting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the country. Shurov told us his organization has over 8,000 full members, and claimed he would be able to rally over 200,000 supporters into the streets (without paying them) if the need arose. Shurov maintained there is widespread discrimination against Russian speakers. He complained in particular about an alleged scarcity of access to Russian-language schooling at all levels. When asked whom Russian speakers would most likely support in the upcoming polls, Shurov dismissed Tymoshenko, Yushchenko, and Yanukovych, indicating disillusionment with

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all the major parties. Even the PoR, which is typically viewed as more supportive of the Russian language, garnered his disapproval.

17. (SBU) However, according to a November poll conducted by the Ukrainian Democratic Circle, the majority of Ukrainians do not consider the language issue a priority. 54.7% of respondents called the issue "not pertinent", with only 14.7% finding it "urgent". Oleksandr Lytvynenko, an expert on domestic politics at the Razumkov Center for Economic and Political Studies, reinforced this impression, telling us his think tank was not conducting a survey on the status of the Russian language this year because they do not see it as an issue of great concern to most Ukrainians. He noted that in contrast to the 2004 campaign season, candidates this year are generally downplaying the divisive issue.

Russia

18. (SBU) Though Shurov never said so outright, he alluded that much of his organization's support comes from Russia. The Razumkov Center's Lytvynenko said he believes that Russia is using the language issue as a tool to attempt to influence Ukraine's electoral agenda, and that Russia is bolstering its "hard" tools, like the Black Sea Fleet and gas, with "soft" tools like language.

Comment

19. (SBU) Comment: The PoR is, thus far at least, downplaying the language issue at the national level as it uses criticism of economic policy and the current leadership to attract disillusioned voters in Ukrainophone, historically "orange" western and central Ukraine. At the same time, the PoR is stressing the issue locally in the East and South to rally their core electorate. A President Yanukovych might not be able to fulfill his campaign promise to make Russian a second state language, but he could probably satisfy most of his

supporters with more modest measures rolling back the present
government's efforts to promote Ukrainian.
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